DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 498 CS 001 299

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TITLE Television and Reading in the United Kingdom.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 3p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association World Congress on Reading (5th, Vienna, Austria, August 12-14, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Basic Reading; *Beginning Reading; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Television; Programing (Broadcast); Reading; Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

Television output in the United Kingdom is limited to three main channels. Two of these are controlled by a public corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); one is operated by a number of commercial companies under the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). Both the BBC and IBA have expanded their educational output in recent years and cooperate with each other in broadcasting to schools. Over the past ten years one or the other of the broadcasting companies has provided a weekly series, extending over a school year, which deals specifically with learning to read. The earlier programs used a central figure in the role of teacher, and their shape and form followed a normal classroom lesson very closely. In 1970 a series was written which attempted to bridge the gap between pre-reading and reading, taking in a pre-school as well as a starting school audience. The human teacher was no longer used and the series was written around the fantasy world of animated puppets. The programs were essentially a stimulus. The teaching was left to the teacher in the classroom. Another recent development has been the production of a series for slow learners based on the thinking of a research team, rather than one particular author. (WR)

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Television and Reading in the United Kingdom

by Keith Gardner

Introduction

Television output in the United Kingdom is limited to three main channels. Two of these are controlled by a public corporation, the B.b.C.; one is operated by a number of commercial companies under the Independent Broadcasting Authority (I.B.A.). For broadcasts to schools there is liaison between the B.B.C. and I.B.A., and it is unlikely that there would be direct competition for a viewing audience at any specific time. That is to say, a televised reading programme would not be transmitted at the same time on two channels. Indeed, up to this time, there is such a level of agreement in programme planning that it is rare for a school series to have direct competition at all. In the United Kingdom, about 91% of secondary schools, 96% of junior schools (7 - 11 year pupils) and 64% of infant schools (5 - 7 year pupils) are equipped with television. Normally, Junior and Infant schools have one television receiver to serve the whole school.

1. The General Development of Broadcasts to Schools

Both the B.B.C. and I.B.A. have expanded their educational output in recent years. Programme planning has to balance the needs of a wide age range of pupils over most aspects of the curriculum. In the general area of Language, the emphasis has been on English, rather than on learning to read. Nevertheless, over the past ten years one or other of the broadcasting companies have provided a weekly series, extending over a school year, which deals specifically with learning to read. It would appear that programmes with a general language content, designed for 7 - 9 year old children have captured the largest audiences. Typical figures for such programmes are:-

5 - 7 year olds	47% of schools
7 - 9 year olds	70% of schools

In contrast, reading programmes have recorded the following audience figures.

5 - 7 year olds	42% of schools
7 - 9 year olds	35% of schools

These figures should not be taken to indicate a smaller interest in reading programmes than in programmes with a wider language content. Rather, they show how, in effect, it is easier to design general language programmes with a wider application than is possible when one constructs material for learning to read.

2. The Structure of Reading Programmes

The earliest programmes used a central figure in the role of "teacher", and their shape and form followed a normal classroom lesson very closely. In brief, the television screen was used to gain an audience for an expert teacher who utilised his, or her, tried and tested classroom techniques supplemented by the added sophistication of professional graphic work, animated charts and diagrams, and dramatisation. The broadcasting companies produced good back-up materials for teachers, and the opinion has been expressed that these were more valuable than the programmes.

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In 1970, the present writer wrote a series which broke new ground in two directions. First, an attempt was made to bridge the gap between pre-reading and reading, taking in a pre-school as well as a starting school audience. Second, the human teacher disappeared from sight, and the series was written around the phantasy world of animated puppets.

The nature of the larger population demanded a link between the general language programme and the "learning to read" programme; the technical resources of television were used to illustrate the relationship between spoken and written language. Three broad objects were isolated:-

i) To provide a motivated situation in which children listened to sophisticated language, and were introduced to simple and complex language structures.

ii) To show how the graphic form of language utilised a unique directional sequence, and also used space as boundaries between words.

iii) To indicate that letters, and sequences of letters are cues to interpreting graphic language.

The programmes were essentially a stimulus. The puppets, and a magic box, created a phantasy world in which letters and words had an integral part in events. The teaching was left to the teacher in the classroom, who was provided with a copy of the script, a description of the author's intentions, and suggestions for activities. Because the home, as well as the classroom, was considered from the outset, simplicity and non-technical language was the key note of the back-up materials.

In passing, it is interesting to note the fundamental similarity between this kind of thinking and the much more ambitious Sesame Street developed in the U.S.A. One should add that the total budget for the U.K. project was in the region of £50,000.

Another recent development has been the production of a series for slow learners based on the thinking of a research team, rather than one particular author. This pooling of resources, testing of ideas before production, and the involvement of groups of teachers in evolving programmes is likely to become an important aspect of programme design.

3. Problems

In British primary education over the past twenty-five years there has been a definite move away from the prescribed syllabus, and prescriptive teaching. As a result, the formal reading lesson has become almost extinct, and individualised tutoring more common. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to forsee a future for television as a means of mass instruction.

Clearly, among any groups of twenty to forty children there will be a wide range of abilities and needs. The chance that all, or even the majority, will benefit from a small segment of specific teaching is very slight. Hence, the future of the television programme, with special reference to the teaching of reading, has to be envisaged in two ways.

Ideally, the teacher requires a library of taped materials which can be used with small groups of pupils at the appropriate time. It is asking too much to assume that an audience is ready for teaching at the time selected by the programme planners of a broadcasting company.

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With the spread of television facilities, such materials might, of course, be produced in units attached to Universities, Colleges,and Higher Education establishments, rather than by the television companies. This is already happening in the U.K., and some of the first results are encouraging. Or, we can even envisage children in schools producing viable materials.

The main obstacle is the comparative scarcity of video-tape equipment, especially in primary schools, and the prohibitive cost of providing it.

It is interesting to note that if this kind of development does find favour with teachers, then the provision of a number of small television sets in school will be more important than one large set. At the present time, television in school is most often seen in terms of mass, rather than group or individual viewing.

If this is accepted, then the role of the mass programme,must be to provide a means for the teacher to refine teaching, rather than a teaching instrument itself. Television is now part of a child's environment in the U.K. Its potency as a means of gaining attention is unquestioned. What needs to be determined is the role it can play in education.

For the present writer, it is the manner in which, through television, an author can create his ideal world for his purposes, that is important. It is the way in which children can experience sights, sounds and events beyond the range of their normal living that must be captured. It is the teacher who must bring form and shape to experience through personal contact with children. Television can be a vital aid; it cannot replace the teacher, nor can it make bad teaching good.